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## The Bells of Helmus (Book Review)

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# BOOK REVIEWS

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*The Bells of Helmus*. Cobie de Lespinasse. Portland, Oregon: The Metropolitan Press, 1934. 250 pp. Reviewed by Dr. James C. Schaap, Emeritus Professor of English, Dordt University.

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*The Bells of Helmus* was published in 1934, which means no adult reading it at the time would be alive today. Nonetheless, you don't need to be clairvoyant to know that Cobie de Lespinasse's story of her own hometown's past went over in Orange City like, well, flatulence in church, as they say.

It's a strange book really, all about faith, or the lack of it, or the spirit of it, or the simply hideous results of it when carried along by mean-spirited folks far more conscious of the mote in your eye than the log-jam in their own. Ms. de Lespinasse (Les pin' awes, or something like that) is the granddaughter-in-law of a unique character in a brand new Dutch-American colony the author calls "Helmus." Be ye not deceived; she's talking about 1875 Orange City, Iowa, the citadel of Dutch Reformed-ism in the newly homesteaded northwestern corner of this state, the town in which she herself was born and reared.

Frederick Manfred's "hometown" novels—he called them "*rumes*"—consistently called Orange City "Jerusalem," and with good reason. Orange City was, at least until the Second World War, the county seat (once righteous Dutch burghers strong-armed the county records from Calliope/Hawarden, where the gangsters who ran the region kept it under lock and key...or tried). Inasmuch as Orange City was the seat of political power in the region, it was also home to many of the region's brightest lights, as well as the uppity folks, frontier doctors and lawyers and judges, not to mention the academics who gathered there once the town had reared its own Academy, a true institution of higher learning.

Sioux Center long ago surpassed Orange City in sheer business acumen and drive, which is to say, the business of hustling; but even today, Orange City, the tulip capital of the county with the highest percentage of Dutch-Americans of any in the nation, remains the only burg whose name is drawn from Dutch royalty.

In many fictions about the Dutch Reformed, those of us who are so come off as self-righteous fustspots too full of our own hot air. To mangle an old line from Mencken, we are grim-faced, haunted by the fear that "someone, somewhere is having a good

time." We're dour, no-fun-on Sunday workaholics, who register zero tolerance for sinners who mow their lawns on the Sabbath or jog during church.

In those novels, insiders have little to do with outsiders because insiders are unreasonably clannish and unwelcoming. Because we have so little to do with others, we pick fights with our own in petty quarrels, sharp enough to cut each other to shreds if there's even a hint of something unorthodox lingering unseen somewhere close. During the fifties, people hid television antenna in their attics rather than mount them on the roof for all the world to see.

That kind of petulant righteousness is caught in brilliant technicolor in *The Bells of Helmus*, and it's there in spades, which would be, back then, a shockingly worldly usage for someone like me to employ, "in spades," after all, suggesting I play with the *duivel's pretenboek*, the Devil's cards.

Card-playing is one thing; the seventh commandment begets a whole bigger world of sin and repression. No Dutch Reformed writer of the 20th century, none at least that I know, has not written about the Seventh Commandment. Frederick Manfred's *The Secret Place* or *The Man Who Looked Like the Prince of Wales* (published under two titles) details the sins of a man who was, sadly enough, a repeat offender. In the poem "A Lesson in Rhetoric," Stanley Wiersma (Sietze Buning) tells the tale of an upright soul given to crusading for the moral right until his own daughter is caught with her pants—well, you know. Peter DeVries's many novels indulge in Seventh Commandment backsliding with great comic appeal. The most important story of my own first novel, *Home Free*, happened in the antecedent action of the story and has everything to do with a violation of the seventh commandment.

For reference sometime, pick up a copy of the 1925 Pulitzer Prize winner, *So Big*, by Edna Ferber, a novel whose setting is east a day's travel (suburban Chicago), but just as critical of Dutch Reformed self-righteousness as is *The Bells of Helmus*.

Why the fuss? Like most staunch protestants, Dutch Calvinists have frequently seemed fixated on sexual sins. Besides, a violation of the seventh com-

mandment, “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” was immediately verifiable and therefore often publicly disciplined, the only commandment on which the church, the real authority in old-line Dutch Reformed communities, lowered the righteous boom so openly. There were no scarlet letters, but many church people my age or older can remember a time when some winsome pregnant young woman stood up front in the pews to take a score of public licks for love.

And so it is here in *Bells of Helmus*. The heart of a plot structure that rotates between protagonist characters is a sweet little Dutch maiden in pigtailed named Jeannie, who, in all innocence (seriously!), gets herself pregnant by the doctor’s wonderful son. Trust me, there’s not a word about how that almost immaculate conception was accomplished; one of the unanswered questions of the story is how on earth the deed got done. We’re simply to know it did. The story suddenly makes clear that Jeannie is pregnant, and that, in her time, she delivers a darling little boy, out of town of course, but not out of mind.

She’s in Oregon when the precious bundle arrives, where she’s being cared for by Helmus’s only medical doctor, who got up and left because he simply could not handle the insistent militancy of those church bells ringing from both sides of Main Street and what those bells symbolized. What drives him batty and eventually out of town for good is the overbearing religiosity of the people, demonstrated in a spirituality that grows like poison hemlock out of their own manifest boorishness. Besides, it’s his own son who got poor and beautiful Jeannie in the family way.

There are untold prototypes in the novel, especially if you know the real story of Ms. de Lespinaase’s grandfather-in-law, Orange City’s first doctor, a cultured gentleman among other pioneers, a man who practiced his brand of humanism via a creed that he’d

say had only one commandment—to love people, a creed that makes the thorny Dutch Reformed pietists roll their eyes. Cobie Muyskens de Lespinasse is not moving far afield from her own family’s stories.

Strangely enough, quite startlingly in fact, *Bells of Helmus* is a religious novel, suggesting that Cobie de Lespinasse was somehow herself as incapable of escaping her own religious tradition as the whipping she gives Orange City’s mega-religious folks in the novel might suggest. The good humanist doctor has his own come-to-Jesus moment late in the novel and thus gives up his secularism in exchange for a level of spirituality he would have disparaged earlier in his Orange City sojourn.

It’s a bizarre novel meant to carry fiery arrows into the fort Orange City once may have wanted to be, standing steadfast against worldliness. But *Bells of Helmus* also insists on rewriting the old creeds.

If the novel weren’t so much about some of us, I’d say, “Don’t waste your time.” But it’s bigger than its obvious and sometimes glaring limitations. Today, almost 90 years later, it offers more to consider than its author ever intended, both about her and about us.

I don’t think anyone will write an opera based on the *Bells of Helmus* for next year’s Tulip Festival Night Show. I’m quite sure it wouldn’t go up.

*Bells of Helmus* conveys a jaundiced view of what it once meant to be Dutch Reformed or Dutch Calvinist out in the hinterland, but while I can imagine Ms. de Lespinasse had her own good reasons to carpet-bomb her hometown, this particular 73-year-old reader can’t help but believe she’s not all wrong about how things were or may have been.

A wonderful thing about novels—about books—is that sometimes they teach you far more than their authors may have ever intended. So ’tis with *The Bells of Helmus*.

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Guillaume Groen Van Prinsterer, *Unbelief and Revolution* translated by Harry Van Dyke. Bellingham WA: Lexham Press, 2018. ISBN: 978-1-68359228-0, xxxix+267 pp.; also Harry Van Dyke, *Challenging the Spirit of Modernity: A Study of Groen van Prinsterer’s Unbelief and Revolution*. Bellingham WA: Lexham Press, 2018. ISBN: 978-1-68359320-1, xxii+345 pp. By Keith C. Sewell, Emeritus Professor of History, Dordt University.

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These volumes represent new editions of a single volume first published in 1989.<sup>1</sup> The first is Harry Van Dyke’s translation into English of Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer’s (hereafter Groen) *Ongeloof en Revolutie* (1847, 1868). This republication of *Unbelief and Revolution* (UR) is a welcome contribution to Christian literature in English. Harry Van Dyke is a Fellow of the Dooyeweerd Centre for Christian

Philosophy and Professor Emeritus of History at Redeemer University College, Ancaster, Ontario.

When this book was first published, Groen was already known in the Netherlands for the early volumes in the *Archives ou Correspondance inédite de la Maison de l’Orange-Nassau* (1835-61) series. Groen’s thinking was deeply historical. That said, *Unbelief and Revolution* is not only of historical interest because